

The King's Stilts Thematic Unit

Development of Unit Concept

Based on one of Dr. Seuss's classic books, this unit is a resource that can be used in multiple grades. Students begin by reading *The King's Stilts*, study and discuss the book, construct a map of the setting, and use their imaginations as they describe the culture and ecology of the Kingdom of Binn. As they actively participate in the unit students become cartographers, cultural anthropologists, and ecologists. In the process they learn the vocabulary and concepts related to the activities: mapmaker, cartographer, culture, cultural anthropologist, ecology, ecologist, biomes, landforms, map legend, scale, and compass rose.

Why map a fictional country or describe the culture and ecology of that country: because students practice the tools of the disciplines when they do this. Mapping a fictional country allows students to create a model of that setting. It's difficult for elementary school students to conceptualize the size of their town, state, or country. A picture book brings this down to a size they can imagine: the country is held within the pages of the book. Illustrations are available for review allowing students to map the setting and describe the culture and ecology of the country.

Why use *The King's Stilts*? One of Seuss's lesser-known books, *The King's Stilts*, is one of only four books written and illustrated by Dr. Seuss and published before his death that was written in prose. The prose format lends itself readily to a literature study providing numerous places for teachers to pause and elicit student predictions. The book can be divided into sections to be read over a period of days or completed in one reading.

The book can be revisited and reread to reinforce the literary elements (including plot, theme, and character development), and has interdisciplinary connections.

Synopsis

The story is set in the Kingdom of Binn, a country situated below water level and surrounded by a body of water. The only defense against flooding is the Dike Trees that line the shore and hold back the water. There is, of course a threat, to the trees: birds called Nizzards love to eat the roots of the trees. King Birtram organized a group of Patrol Cats that chase the birds away so the Nizzards do not kill the trees and flood the kingdom.

The king worked very hard (when he worked) and played very hard (after he completed his work) by walking around the kingdom on his red stilts. Lord Droon, believed this was not dignified and stole the stilts. The king became depressed with only work and no play, and the patrol cats became lazy without the attention and encouragement of the king. The Nizzards attacked the tree roots placing everyone in the kingdom in danger. The Kingdom of Binn was saved when Eric the page boy ingeniously restored the stilts to the king who in turn recovered from his depression and energized the Patrol Cats to run off the Nizzards - but for how long? There are strong ecological themes in the book that make it particularly applicable to the science curriculum.

Mapping Dr. Seuss Thematic Unit

This thematic unit authentically combines science, language arts, math, and social studies standards. Reading maps, charts, graphs, and graphic organizers, are common curriculum standards in science, social studies, and language arts. Math shares simple

measurement, area, estimation, ratios, and proportion with science. Science environmental issues including landforms and biomes are shared with social studies curriculum. Reading and writing are used in all disciplines. Local, state, and national standards differ somewhat in the levels to which these concepts are taught and the performance levels expected in each grade level; however, the lessons in the unit can be adapted to the grade level desired.

Teaching the Unit

As a pre-assessment, use three sheets of flip chart paper, each separate sheet labeled at the top with one of these terms: Mapmaker: Cartographer, Cultural Anthropologist, Environmentalist. Explain that these are the titles of people who do different jobs. Discuss each of these terms with the students. List all of the students' ideas about each term on the corresponding sheet - what each would do, what would their job be, what would they study, what would each want to know about a country? Use one color marker when you record the students' first concepts of the terms. Post these flip chart sheets in the classroom for use while completing the unit. As the lessons in the unit progress, use a different colored marker for additions and add students' new contributions to the list on each sheet. I like to use black for the first list and add all of the new information in red, but any color will be effective as long as you distinguish between the first impressions and the new ideas

Begin with a picture walk through the illustrations in *The King's Stilts* and let students predict the plot of the story. Read and review over several days as appropriate for the grade level. Include student retellings of the story. Following lessons focus on the three roles students will perform in the culminating project.

Lessons – Cartographer:

- Read *There's a Map On My Lap!: All About Maps* (Rabe 2002) from The Cat in the Hat's Learning Library. This book, written in verse, covers the basic elements found in maps and is a journey through map-making led by the Cat in the Hat. Discuss the map elements described in Rabe's book and read a second time as students complete a graphic organizer (a web featuring the main terms with definitions is an excellent organizer for this) to use as reference during the mapping exercise.
- Map the classroom – students measure the dimensions of the classroom, and create a map based on the classroom and objects in the room. (The level of math skills used will depend on the curriculum, but can include drawing the room to scale and calculating the area of the room if students have studied this. Younger students can just draw the map.) Include the basic elements of a map including a compass rose and legend.
- Students map their home or their own room at home as a homework assignment.
- Use the flip chart sheet labeled Mapmaker: Cartographer. Ask students again what a cartographer would do and list the things they should see represented on a map (compass rose, legend, scale, etc.) Remember to use a different color marker to differentiate the new information they supply from their initial responses.

Lessons - Cultural Anthropologist:

- Share the *Green Eggs and Ham Cookbook: Recipes Inspired by Dr. Seuss* (Brennan, G. 2006). This resource contains recipes with names inspired by the books of Dr. Seuss. Explain that one thing that cultural anthropologists study about a culture is the food. If your school allows, prepare some of the recipes in the cookbook and share in the classroom.
- Discuss other things about the culture of a country that cultural anthropologists study.
- Discuss with students what they know about their own culture and read books from the school library about other cultures.
- Use the flip chart sheet labeled Cultural Anthropologist to record their new responses as you discuss culture and cultural anthropology. .) Remember to use a different color marker to differentiate the new information they supply from their initial responses.

Lessons – Environmentalist:

- Ask the students what things they know about the kingdom of Binn. What is the main danger to the people that live there? What does it mean when it is said that the country is below sea level? Can the students think of any location they know of that is below sea level? If students do not make the connection to the real-world situation in New Orleans and the flooding after Hurricane Katrina, remind them of this, and discuss what happened to the environment and people in New Orleans.
- If Internet access in the classroom and reading levels of students permit, explore the biome resources and descriptions of landforms found at

enchantedlearning.com and blueplanetbiomes.org. As an alternative, the teacher can research this and provide the students with information from these or other resources. (Supplement with children's books with environmental themes from the school library.)

- Use the flip chart sheet labeled Environmentalist as you discuss the terms environment, environmentalist, biome, and landform with the students. Record their new ideas about environmentalists. .) Remember to use a different color marker to differentiate the new information they supply from their initial responses.

Culminating Experience- The Mapping Project

Review *The King's Stilts* - students retell the story and review the illustrations. This book, along with *There's a Map On My Lap!: All About Maps*, their map graphic organizers, *Green Eggs and Ham Cookbook: Recipes Inspired by Dr. Seuss* and their posted flip chart sheets should be kept available in the classroom for reference as students are working on this project.

Students will work in project groups of three to six students, meeting first with their project group and then dividing into three teams per project group to complete the tasks. The teacher should pre-assign students to project groups and include students with strengths in differing learning styles.

Explain to the students that they are going to *Think Like Dr. Seuss!* Each project group will draw a map of the Kingdom of Binn from *The King's Stilts*; list and draw what they know or think about the culture of the people of Binn; and describe the biomes and environment of Binn. Refer to the posted flip chart descriptions - Who would draw a

map? Who would describe a culture? Who would work on environmental problems? Give students the directions for this project. Discuss the responsibilities for the project group and the three tasks. Allow groups time to brainstorm and to decide who will be responsible for each task within the group. Works in progress and completed projects will be displayed on flip chart sheets in the classroom.

Assessment

Authentic assessment is used throughout the unit. Students have multiple ways of providing evidence of learning and teachers have a variety of authentic ways of assessing growth. A pre-assessment of students' understanding of Mapmaker: Cartographer, Cultural Anthropologist, and Environmentalist are recorded on separate flip chart sheets before the unit is started. Formative Assessment of developing concepts are recorded on these sheets in a different color marker to display what they are learning as they create a map, describe the culture, and identify environmental issues in their final project. Post Assessment, a holistic rubric, can be modified with state standards and levels of mastery for evaluation of the culminating project.

Final Thoughts

The unit is easily varied (or extended for follow-up learning experiences. Another variation is suggested for use after the unit is completed and the students have had experience with the process. Time needed for the unit will vary based on the individual class of students and the school schedule. The culminating project allows students to develop and display their knowledge of mapping, culture, and the environment. Students use higher order thinking skills of application, analysis, synthesis, and evaluation as they problem-solve, create their map, devise solutions to environmental

issues, and gain a better understanding of differing cultures. Students are given a chance to use multiple intelligences including: Linguistic, Logical-Mathematical, Visual-Spatial, Bodily-Kinesthetic, Interpersonal, and Intrapersonal, and Naturalistic.

The Mapping Dr. Seuss book study provides authentic learning experiences: hands-on applications of mapmaking techniques, a better understanding of mapping real-world places, and a reason to develop and use concepts of culture and ecology. Students learn about and compare real cultures and real ecological settings and imagine the culture and ecology of the fictional culture. Additionally, there is real-world application as they remember the flooding in New Orleans. By thinking like Dr. Seuss students can learn to think like (and be) cartographers, cultural anthropologists, and ecologists!